

# University continuing education in a neoliberal landscape: developments in England and Aotearoa New Zealand

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**UNIVERSITY CONTINUING EDUCATION IN A NEOLIBERAL  
LANDSCAPE: DEVELOPMENTS IN ENGLAND AND AOTEAROA  
NEW ZEALAND**

**Abstract**

This paper explores how changing higher education policies and funding, influenced by neoliberalism, are impacting on university adult and continuing education in England and Aotearoa New Zealand. The downhill trajectory of English university continuing education in the first decade of the twenty-first century is compared with the apparent buoyancy of the situation in New Zealand during the same period. The paper discusses some of the contextual factors which may have contributed to sustaining continuing education in New Zealand, against the tide of developments elsewhere, and in spite its subjection to the influence of neoliberal policies since the 1980s. These factors include: an ethos of public dissemination of knowledge, an acknowledgement of the universities' role as 'critic and conscience' of society, a broad commitment to educational equality and an approach which has been strategic as well as pragmatic. The paper describes developments in one New Zealand continuing education department between 2006 and 2010 as it experiences further institutional and political change. The author concludes that, in spite of having demonstrated considerable resilience, the current structures and activities of continuing education departments in New Zealand are as fragile as they have been shown to be in England. Possible responses to the current situation are discussed and

‘radical hope’ (Brookfield 2005) is advocated as the university-based adult educators’ response in difficult times. Radical hope, founded on critical theory, involves recognising and challenging the assumptions of neoliberalism, as well as critical praxis (Carr and Kemmis 1986), and a reaffirmation on the part of academics and adult educators of the political nature of adult education (Freire 1972; Crowther et al 2005; Martin 2008; Wallace 2008).

***Key words:*** *University continuing education, higher education, adult and community education, Aotearoa New Zealand*

### **Background: The landscape of university continuing education**

Over the past thirty years, universities across the globe have had to respond to complex ideological and policy changes well documented in the higher education literature (Jary and Parker 1998, Bourgeois et al 1999, Barnett 2000, Osborne et al 2004, Canaan and Shumar 2008) and which have impacted on the mission and funding of universities. Underlying many of these changes has been the ascendance of neoliberalism (Olssen et al 2004, Canaan and Shumar 2008). The logic of neoliberalism is underpinned by a conviction that the market is paramount and that the state should take a minimal role in the social realm. In the field of adult education and training, this logic places the responsibility for educational participation or non-participation, success or failure on the individual, rather than on government. In this formulation, the valid outcome of education is the development of human capital (Becker 1975). The notion that individuals carry the primary responsibility for investing in their own future through the accumulation of educational credentials and that this, in turn, will produce benefits for the national economy, has dominated post-compulsory education and training policy since the 1970s. Accordingly, the activities of

universities have increasingly been directed towards profitability, generating income from private and corporate sources, credentialising learning and competing for students, research prestige and global status (Slaughter and Leslie 1997).

University adult and continuing education, whose historical emphasis has been on offering part-time non-accredited, non-vocational educational opportunities, has not been immune from these changes (McIlroy and Spencer 1988; Taylor 2005; Jones et al 2010). Historically, university continuing education has occupied a marginal position, in the 'border country' (McIlroy and Westwood 1993) between the university and wider community. This has proved a mixed blessing. On the positive side, away from the more rigid structures of the centre ground in higher education there has, in the past, been room for creative practice and flexibility to innovate. There has, in the past, been potential for engaging with individuals and communities who do not form the standard constituency of elite universities. Historically too, there has been some freedom from regimes of accreditation, enabling people to study for a short period, primarily for personal interest and without the pressure of assessment (Bellis et al 1999, Preece 1999). However, and particularly in England, this freedom has been largely swept away as a result of funding regimes which have excluded informal and non-credit bearing adult education (Kogan 2000; Taylor 2005; Duke 2008; Jones et al 2010).

On the downside, the border activities of continuing education departments do not always sit comfortably with those of the mainstream of universities, with

their less flexible approaches to student entry, curriculum and assessment. The fact that much of the teaching in continuing education departments takes place in the evening or away from main campus activities renders it less visible than the standard academic departments. Teaching in continuing education departments has tended to be undertaken by part time, hourly-paid or temporary staff who may not feel a close association with the aims of the department or the wider university. Whilst academics from mainstream university departments may once have been willing to contribute to non credit bearing continuing education courses, this has become less attractive as the emphasis of universities has increasingly been placed on research and publication rather than teaching. Meanwhile, academics directly employed in university continuing education have been prone to be regarded as peripheral to the central aims of the university (McIlroy and Westwood 1993). Furthermore, academic study in the field of adult education has a comparatively low profile in many universities. In combination, these factors render university continuing education's position rather precarious, particularly at a time of rapid change in the university sector.

### **Travelling across the changing landscape**

This paper arises from the author's relocation, in 2006, from an English university whose continuing education department was in the throes of restructuring and subsequent closure, to a continuing education department in a New Zealand which, on the face of it, seemed to be in considerably better shape. In making the move to a similar setting in a different part of the world there is a temptation to compare and contrast. Whilst over-generalising from comparison can be problematic, it can also be instructive (McLean 1992, 1995; Teichler and

Hanft 2009) to explore the extent to which global trends and ‘policy borrowing’ (Philips 2009) may be mitigated or moderated by the particularities of national and cultural contexts.

New Zealand and England share aspects of a common heritage as a result of the migration and colonisation of the nineteenth century and the continuing flow of workers, travellers and ideas between the two countries. They share a common experience of the aggressive implementation of neoliberal policy directions during the 1980s and 1990s. There is also, anecdotally, a tendency to assume that historical links between the two countries, built on a colonial past, imply an inevitable transfer of policy from England to New Zealand. However, the geographical, social and cultural differences between the two countries mean that their policy paths do not necessarily always converge (Thrupp 2001). In comparison with England, New Zealand is largely rural, with the exception of a small number of major centres of population (Auckland and Wellington in the North Island, Christchurch and Dunedin in the South Island). Its population - at a little over four million - is small, enabling social networks to flourish, often in spite of considerable geographical distance. It is, officially, a bicultural and bilingual state; a country in which an indigenous (Māori) population, a European settler (Pākehā) population and a new migrant population from across the globe coexist within the context of the Treaty of Waitangi<sup>1</sup>.

The two countries share common traditions in university continuing education. In England it has been driven by diverse and sometimes contradictory philosophical and political perspectives - liberal, socialist, Christian and radical

(McIlroy and Spencer 1988; Kelly 1992; Thompson 1996; Speight 2004; Malcolm and Zukas 2007; Jones et al 2010). Dominant in the discourse of English university extramural or continuing adult education has been the notion of 'The Great Tradition' (Wiltshire 1956). Wiltshire described this 'tradition' as characterised by a social science-based curriculum, a tutorial-based pedagogy and non-vocational and non-assessed outcomes. Running alongside the liberal strand of university continuing education has been a more radical perspective. That perspective has been characterised by a concern with adult education as a means of advancing working class interests, extending knowledge to those who have been excluded from its benefits, and of adult education with a social purpose – encouraging social activism and democratic debate (Thompson (ed.) 1980; McIlroy and Spencer 1988).

University continuing education in New Zealand has its origins in this British model of liberal and extra-mural adult education. As in England, it has historical links to the efforts of the Workers' Education Association to offer non-vocational, non-accredited education to working people (Tobias 2001; Findsen and Harré Hindmarsh 1996). On the face of it, therefore, the similarities between university continuing education in the two countries are compelling.

When I relocated there in 2006, the relative health of New Zealand's university continuing education departments, compared with the situation in England, was striking, and seemed worthy of exploration. Information was collected from a review of the literature of continuing education in both countries over the past 30 years, from conversations with practitioners<sup>ii</sup> and from personal observation of

developments in university continuing education in England and New Zealand between 2006 and 2010.

### **Going downhill: English continuing education since the 1980's**

As early as 1956, Harold Wiltshire suggested that the Great Tradition of adult education in England might have had its day: that increased educational opportunities and a more vocational thrust were eroding its mission and the forms of pedagogic practice which he advocated. Twenty years later, James Callaghan's (then British Prime Minister) Ruskin College Speech (1976) signalled a more 'hands on' approach by government to educational issues: questioning the value of informal teaching methods, asserting the desirability of a core curriculum and stressing the need for education to respond to the demands of industry. Callaghan's speech was an early hint that human capital arguments were gaining sway, signalling a shift to a more instrumental approach to education policy, which would surely impact on adult education too.

Liberal adult education in England became seriously vulnerable to attack from the early 1980's when Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government, bent on neoliberal reform, began to assert a strongly instrumentalist and individualised vision for education and training and to tighten funding controls on university adult education. Taylor (2005) and Jones et al (2010) have traced some of the social and policy developments impacting on continuing education in British universities during this period: the growing emphasis on professional development and vocational education; the focus on young people entering full-time higher education at the expense of adult and part-time provision; and the



tendency to equate education with certification which led to the withdrawal of government funding for non-accredited education (Moseley in Jones et al 2010), rendering it accessible in the main only to those who could afford to pay for it in full. At the same time, government attacks on workers' organisations (McIlroy 1995) undermined the links between adult education and trade unionism. The responses of university continuing education departments were varied but on the whole pragmatic and included developing accredited courses and professional development programmes as well as dabbling in access to higher education and forging stronger business and community links.

Discussion around the decline of university continuing education in England during the 1980s and 1990s (McIlroy and Spencer 1988; Mayo and Thompson 1995; Thompson 1997; Taylor 1996, 2005; Jones et al 2010) lays bare differences in philosophical and political perspective among university adult educators through this period. Jane Thompson and others (Thompson (ed.) 1980; 1997; Mayo and Thompson 1995) criticised the complacency and elitism of university adult educators and their tendency to bend to accommodate New Right agendas. In capitulating to government policy changes, Thompson (1997: 129-133) has argued, adult educators in the liberal tradition helped to pave the way for neoliberalism and betrayed adult education as critical praxis. Attacked from the right and critiqued from the left, liberal university continuing education in England became increasingly beleaguered.

A change of government in 1997 did not signal a revival in continuing education's fortunes. The New Labour government's widening participation

agenda (DfEE 1998; DfES 2003; DfES 2006), which aimed at increasing numbers entering higher education and broadening its social base, resulted in a plethora of widening participation funding initiatives for community outreach, partnerships with community-based adult education providers and workplace and work-based learning projects (Preece 1998, 1999; Thomas et al 2002; Bowl 2003). Some of these initiatives were taken up by continuing education departments. However, when the government's focus moved away from widening participation across the board to increasing and widening participation among 18-30 year-olds entering full-time higher education (DfES 2003), university continuing education found itself out in the cold. Between 2005 and 2009, continuing education departments at Birmingham, Durham, Exeter, Leeds and Newcastle Universities were among those which closed, their staff being either retired, made redundant or 'integrated' into the mainstream departments of the parent university (Malcolm and Zukas 2007; Duke 2008; Lee 2009; Jones et al 2010).

In 2008 a further blow was delivered to English university continuing education when the UK government introduced a new regulation denying funding to students wishing to study at a level equivalent to, or lower than, that which they have previously attained. The Equivalent or Lower Qualification (ELQ) rule has meant that, having switched much of their activity to accredited courses in order to qualify for government funding, continuing education departments have now been caught in another trap: the ELQ rule has made many would-be participants ineligible for government subsidy. At the same time, the economic crisis which became apparent in the UK in the second half of 2008 threatened further to

undermine adults' ability to pay full cost for their education and employers' willingness to sponsor professional development. As a result, there was another wave of cutbacks and closures in what were well-established continuing education departments in English universities – including Bath, Bristol, Bucks New University, Cardiff, City University London, Lancaster, Manchester and Reading (Stanistreet 2009).

These upheavals have not been unique to university-based adult education. Community- and college-based adult education has been similarly affected. The government's stated policy has been to cut funding for short, personal interest courses - characterised by government representatives as 'holiday Spanish and flower arranging' (CALL 2008; The Guardian 2009); in fact ESOL, literacy, numeracy and skills for life courses have also experienced cutbacks. Until recently, there was little in the way of a concerted response at national level to the crisis in adult education in England. It was not until 2008 that a public campaign was launched in its defence. *The Campaigning Alliance for Lifelong Learning (CALL)*, a loose alliance of public sector trade unions, student representative groups and adult education providers came together to lobby for the maintenance of government support for adult education and for adults' right to access to educational opportunities for 'personal wellbeing and development'. In attempting to unite a broad range of providers, the campaign eschews a more radical stance in favour of one which supports instrumental and (more mutedly) liberal ends. Arguably, the campaign was too little, too late. Reduced subsidies, rising charges, instrumentalist agendas, accreditation regimes and 'quality' controls had already decimated English community-based adult education

(Taylor 2005); college-based adult education has become increasingly tied into vocational training and certification, and universities have all but lost the fight for liberal adult education.

### **Going strong? University Continuing Education in New Zealand**

In comparison with England, New Zealand's continuing education departments appeared to be in relatively good heart at the beginning of 2006. Of the eight universities in New Zealand, four had dedicated centres for continuing education – Auckland, Canterbury, Waikato and Wellington Victoria. A fifth, Otago University, which historically had a strong tradition of university extension and community outreach, had closed its continuing education department in 1995 and implemented a 'dispersed' model of adult continuing education with individual university departments offering public lectures and summer schools to the wider community, whilst the university maintained a small central unit to administer government funding for adult and community education activities. Although there had been some closures, a good deal of restructuring and considerable shifts in emphasis in university continuing education over the previous 30 years there was not, in 2006, the sense of decline in the which was apparent in England.

Adult and community education (ACE) had struggled to survive a period of aggressive neoliberalism pursued by the Labour and National governments of the 1980s and 1990s. Robert Tobias (2004) has described the economic and educational upheavals in New Zealand during that time, which brought education face-to-face with market forces and 'user pays' as dominating

principles of higher education policy. However, Tobias (op cit: 573) also discusses some of the more progressive strands in the policy discourse (particularly during the 1984-1990 Labour government).

First, there has historically been an ethos of public knowledge sharing. In 1959, the Hughes Parry Report was urging universities to involve academic staff in disseminating their research publicly via continuing education departments and to develop their role in continuing professional development by:

Channel[ing] the fruits of its investigation and thought, and the thought and research of others, to the informed public at large...[as well as providing] opportunities for the periodic refreshment and 'upgrading' of those who want to keep abreast of scientific and social change in their fields of special interest

(Hughes Parry cited in Tobias 2001:57)

This commitment to public engagement was discernable in government policy to fund public lectures and dissemination events organised by continuing education departments.

Second, in spite of the fact that the 1990 Education Amendment Act (<http://www.legislation.govt.nz>) laid the ground for a marketised and privatised tertiary education system, at the same time it specifically advocated academic freedom and the university's role as 'critic and conscience' of society. Although it may be argued that mere lip-service is paid to this notion (Jones et al 2000), it suggests that there is some room for manoeuvre, in an increasingly business-driven climate, for those seeking to maintain a broader vision of education.

Other commentators too (Findsen and Harré Hindmarsh 1996; Zepke 2009) suggest that whilst neoliberal economic policies won the day, some space

remained in the social sphere, in which the idea of egalitarianism and education for a democratic society could still be aired. The struggles of Māori to challenge and change hegemonic educational ideas and structures (Walker 2004) were important in claiming this space, speaking up for social and cultural aims of education, rather than simply accepting the neoliberal instrumentalism. The persistence of these progressive strands may have contributed to the maintenance of a role for university continuing education in the New Zealand context.

Third, there has been a stronger history of networking across the adult and community education (ACE) sector in New Zealand than has been discernable in England. ACE Aotearoa, the national organisation for adult education and the National ACE Strategic Alliance have brought together community, school, polytechnic and university-based adult education practitioners under a shared umbrella. And whilst, from time to time, there may have been differences of opinion about how the relatively small pool of resources to fund ACE should be shared, there has been considerable unity about the need for non-accredited adult education activity which aims to meet personal, social and cultural – as well as economic – imperatives.

During the New Zealand Labour Party's most recent period in power, between 1999 and 2008, there was a resurgence of policy support for a broad interpretation of Adult and Community Education (ACE) which impacted positively on university continuing education departments. *Koia! Koia! Towards a Learning Society* (TEC 2001) was a landmark report for the ACE sector as a whole. This report reasserted the value of adult learning for a range of personal,

community and social purposes, and not simply for certification or for professional advancement. Whilst the overall thrust of education policy in New Zealand appeared - as in England – to be focused on skills, qualifications and the knowledge economy (TEC 2007), there remained a place in the policy discourse for the achievement of social and cultural goals.

Leaders of university continuing education departments in New Zealand were quick to capitalise on the 1999 Labour government's 'third way' (Zepke 2009) approach to adult education. They cooperated to ensure that their work was protected (Pearman 2007), and gained policy approval for ring-fenced funding for universities' not-for-credit adult education work. They lobbied for and successfully achieved recognition of the 'distinctive contribution' of university ACE education in:

- Providing research-informed higher level learning that contributes to the creation of an advanced and rapidly evolving knowledge economy
  - Contributing to the knowledge society through preservation, dissemination and application of university research
  - Promoting development of critical and reflective thinking and active, informed citizenship locally, nationally and globally
  - Facilitating pathways into and through university education
  - Building capability in the adult and community education sector
- (www.tec.govt.nz)

This statement of the distinctive contribution of university adult education plays to neoliberal and human capital agendas whilst also advancing more liberal, and in places progressive, notions of university continuing education. And while those in the wider ACE sector may have felt that it amounted to privileged treatment for a relatively privileged area of the sector, the statement of university

continuing education's distinctive contribution was helpful in defining the boundaries of its work and giving it a sense of security.

Government-subsidised short, non-credit-bearing liberal education courses offered to local individuals have historically formed the core of the activities of university continuing education departments in New Zealand. Over the years, and as in England, these departments have diversified to offer a range of educational opportunities: professional and executive development, educational travel, conference management, bridging (preparation for higher education) programmes for domestic and/or international students, and research, teaching and consultancy in the field of adult education and lifelong learning.

Whilst there is currently some government subsidy for liberal adult education courses and for domestic students undertaking preparatory study, continuing education departments tend to operate on a business model. Some programmes earn revenue by offering courses of public or professional interest to various fee-paying audiences. Some rely heavily on international fee paying students - particularly those undertaking bridging and English language courses - to subsidise lower revenue-earning programmes. This has enabled departments to spread their risks and to offset loss-making areas with more profitable ones, without necessarily going down the accreditation route wholesale.

### **A view from close up**

The activities of one continuing education department (on New Zealand's South Island) between 2006 and 2010 illustrate the ways in which university



continuing education in New Zealand, has responded to changing, and sometimes conflicting, agendas. In the 1980s its title of *Department for Extension Studies* reflected the British-influenced model of university liberal education reaching out beyond the university's traditional constituency. In the late 1980s and 1990s, the title *Centre for Continuing Education* again reflected the liberal adult education ethos. A name change in 2005 to one which combined the university's initials with the word *Opportunity* suggested the growing entrepreneurial focus of the department's activities. A negative reaction, among staff and some community based organisations, to this image of commercialism resulted in a further name change in 2009, to *Continuing & Bridging Education*. This may be viewed as an attempt to bring together the diverse activities of the department under one, less commercially focused, title and to reposition it as more integral to wider university activities and strategy. Name changes were a feature of the development of university continuing education in England too, where extramural and extension departments became centres for continuing education, which then transmuted into centres for lifelong learning or centres for professional and continuing education.

Notwithstanding the changes of name between 2005 and 2009, a range of educational activities and programmes continued to be offered under the banner of continuing education, including:

- Liberal education programmes in a range of arts, humanities and social science subject areas
- Short training courses in professional and executive development
- Professional training for adult educators
- Bridging (preparation for higher education) courses
- Tailor made courses for visiting international groups
- Overseas study tours

- Adult education research and consultancy

At any one time, the department might be attracting local, national and international funding from a range of private or public sources; it might be offering adult education or training for personal, professional, social or cultural purposes – or a combination of these. In spreading effort across a number of activities, with different funding sources, the same pragmatic approach was demonstrated as had been apparent in English university continuing education.

Success in achieving profitability from these diverse activities enabled the department to maintain its position as an income-generating enterprise within the university. It also enabled it to subsidise less lucrative areas of its work and to nurture and develop new initiatives. Among these have been projects with clearly social purposes – education for sustainability, educational initiatives aimed at supporting the aspirations of new settlers and migrants, work with regional and national adult education networks and research and publication in the adult education field.

As a result, quite different educational philosophies and approaches have co-existed within one relatively small department. Professional and executive development and international education activities are driven by notions of education as part of a global and local market; bridging education seeks to reconcile the international recruitment of high fee-paying students (in a global education market) with a philosophy of equality of opportunity and widening participation for adult domestic students; partly subsidised university-based

courses of liberal education attract well-educated, middle-class audiences (Findsen and Harré Hindmarsh 1996), but they have limited resources to undertake sustained work in support of more progressive and egalitarian philosophies. While these different approaches may be manageable in a time of financial and policy security, they are likely to be problematic in more testing times. When one area of activity suffers a decline in profitability due to changes in global markets, government policy or the national economy, or when the university decides to cut back on activities that are not regarded as 'mainstream' there may be little to unite the divergent strands within Continuing & Bridging Education.

### **Clouds on the horizon**

In spite of its apparent buoyancy in 2006, a change of government, pressure on university finances, an economic downturn and the continued dominance of neoliberalism in education policy, have signalled trouble for university continuing education in New Zealand. The election of a rightward leaning National Party led coalition government in 2008 meant a return to a more strongly instrumentalist view of adult education. In early 2009, the ACE sector was among the first to experience government funding cuts, in the name of economic stringency and revised priorities. Funding to school-based adult education provision was cut by 80% and support for university-based liberal adult education is to be cut by 50% from 2011. What the Minister of Education referred to as 'hobby classes' (Tolley 2009) – general interest, non-accredited liberal education – were particularly targeted. The Minister's dismissal of adult education for personal ends echoes the UK government's disparaging reference

to 'holiday Spanish and flower arranging' courses as a way of justifying cuts in funding.

In New Zealand, as in England, the arguments used to justify cutbacks in adult education fail to take account of the available research on the benefits of a broadly-based conception of adult education (Feinstein et al 2003; Preston et al 2004; Feinstein et al 2008; Tobias 2009), including its social and political benefits. The rationale for 'redirecting' funding towards addressing numeracy and literacy priorities ignores the potential deterrent effects of labelling individuals as deficient and singling them out for educational remediation (Tobias 2009). The cuts signal the re-emergence of a nakedly neoliberal line in New Zealand and the new government has unsettled the fragile political certainties which have prevailed in adult education for the previous ten years. And whilst there has been a spirited defence by ACE sector (Fordyce and Papa 2009), it has not prevented cuts from being implemented.

At the same time, changes in the funding framework for universities – moving to a bulk funding, rather than a funding-per-student model – and a cap on student numbers are likely to leave university departments arguing over their slice of the funding cake. There are already signs that programmes at sub-degree level (including domestic bridging or preparatory programmes) are vulnerable to being numerically capped (TEU press release 29<sup>th</sup> June 2009). Non-accredited liberal adult education courses are also vulnerable, particularly if their profitability is threatened - by a cut in government subsidy, by increased course fees (Geertshuis 2009) and by the impact of a recession on people's ability to

pay. As employers and workers have felt the pinch of the global economic downturn, professional development has been an early casualty of cutbacks, while the international market for students is vulnerable to policy changes in client countries (particularly in China and the Middle East) as well as to worsening economic climates and fluctuating exchange rates.

University continuing education departments have been subject to recent restructuring in response to changes in the external and institutional environment. At the particular university described earlier in this paper, the appointment of a new Vice-Chancellor in 2009 precipitated a financially-driven review of centrally provided services. Continuing & Bridging Education was among the first to feel the effects. The various aspects of its work have been disaggregated: those parts (such as professional and executive education) regarded as unprofitable in the current climate have been disestablished. Whilst 'liberal' continuing education - in the form of non-accredited public short courses for personal and social interest - remains for the present, it is likely to survive only as long as it continues to turn a profit from fee paying 'customers.' The prospect is that it will become increasingly divorced from progressive and egalitarian notions of adult education.

In New Zealand until recently there has been a degree of resistance to crude instrumentalism in adult education. The historical and cultural context has sustained a consensus around adult education as having social and cultural as well as individual and instrumental purposes. This consensus has been underpinned by discourses of openness, equality and democracy and by the

struggles of adult educators (including those working in universities) to maintain a broad vision of adult education. University continuing education has carved out a distinctive niche for itself within this consensus – disseminating university-generated knowledge to a wider audience, encouraging public debate, contributing to the development of the ACE sector locally and nationally and acting as a focal point for adult education teaching and research. At the same time it has responded pragmatically to the neoliberal thrust in educational policy – dabbling in the global educational marketplace, engaging with the notion of the knowledge economy and embracing an entrepreneurial approach to adult education provision. As a broad and non-instrumentalist vision of adult and community education in New Zealand again comes under attack, university continuing education seems as vulnerable as it has been in England. The next section of this paper discusses the future prospects for university continuing education in both countries and suggests how academics and adult education practitioners might steer a course for university-based adult education through difficult times.

### **Looking ahead: pragmatism, pessimism or ‘radical hope’?**

Globally, educational policy and practice are developing in the wider context of neoliberalism. In both England and New Zealand, to differing degrees, adult education has been a casualty of the overwhelming dominance of marketisation, credentialism and instrumentalism in education. Ironically, the marginality of university continuing education and its relative protection within the walls of academia may historically have offered some room for manoeuvre (Crowther et al 2005; Duke 2008). However, it can no longer successfully stand in isolation

from what is happening in the wider educational landscape. Closures, cutbacks, restructuring, and commodification are reshaping adult education within and outside the university. There seem to be three possible responses to the current challenges: pragmatism, pessimism or 'radical hope' (Brookfield 2005). Each of these responses is discussed in turn.

Many working in university continuing education in both England and New Zealand have attempted to adapt to the changing circumstances by adopting pragmatic practices, responding to shifts in funding and focus, but broadly following the policy leads of successive neoliberal inspired governments. Changes of name, changes in direction and engagement with short-term, project-based funding have been understandable reactions of some hard-pressed adult educators and managers trying to keep university continuing education departments afloat. Others have revelled in the opportunity to engage in educational entrepreneurialism, seeing such activity as a chance to be a player in the knowledge economy. Such strategies have met with some success in the short and medium term. They have enabled the spreading of financial risk and kept continuing education departments on good terms with their parent universities. In some cases they have enabled expansion and innovative (though often short-lived) work has been done in collaboration with community organisations and marginalised groups. However, experience seems to demonstrate that strategies driven by pragmatism are not viable in the long run. The more entrepreneurial of such approaches are prone to fall foul of market forces. This has been demonstrated by the reliance of some university continuing education departments on charging full costs to individuals or to employers. In

an economic downturn these activities are likely to founder and leave continuing education departments vulnerable to charges of unprofitability, and therefore ripe for closure.

Going with the flow of changing policy regimes for the sake of survival may also have the effect of suppressing debates about aims and purposes of adult and continuing education (Thompson 1997: 129). Practical concerns to get things done, to 'deliver' courses and to balance the books may distort considerations about whether what is being done is worth doing. In university continuing education this has resulted in a tendency towards conformity and a rhetorical, rather than real commitment to education for empowerment and democracy (Martin 2008). Alternatively, it may set up divisions about the purposes of adult education or, more mundanely, about how resources should be shared. Such divisions may leave continuing education departments vulnerable to being carved up by universities anxious to make savings.

A second possible response for those in university continuing education departments facing restructuring, redeployment or closure, is despair. It is tempting to conclude that the countervailing forces are so overwhelming that nothing can be done to rescue social and political purpose in education from the grip of rampant individualism and the market. Stephen Brookfield (2005: 8) refers to the danger of *radical pessimism* in the face of: 'the massive twin pillars of capitalism and bureaucratic rationality.' This sense of despair has particularly permeated adult education in England, where the thirty years of sustained attacks have taken their toll. It has sometimes engendered nostalgia for the loss of the



‘Great Tradition’ (if there ever was one) of liberal university continuing education. However, as Thompson (1997) argues, to retreat into either capitulation or pessimism is to deny the potential role of adult education in the struggle for ideas and for a more equal world order.

*Radical hope* (Brookfield 2005) offers a way forward for those in the academy who are committed to a vision of adult education which has as its goal equality and democracy. Radical hope proceeds first from a critique of continuing education’s practice, second from an articulation of the fundamental values which should inform a truly liberatory adult education and third, from the building of alliances with other progressive forces – in the wider adult education sector and beyond – in support an adult education whose curricula and institutions are accessible to all.

Thompson (1997: 132) has suggested that complacency and elitism have characterised university liberal education and she has condemned the failure of many of its practitioners to critique class-, gender- and race-based assumptions about education as well as the enthusiasm with which some university adult educators have responded to the New Right agendas for education. From this perspective, there seems no reason why university continuing education should claim the right to survive if it has failed to serve the educational aspirations of those who have been excluded from what the university should offer.

Whilst continuing education departments in the historical liberal tradition (whether elitist or egalitarian) are unlikely to survive, it is important to rescue

and nurture the principles of radical adult education which have been articulated within the academy (Freire 1972; Crowther et al 2005; The Edinburgh Papers 2008; Martin 2003, 2008): a belief in the equality of human beings, a commitment to social, cultural and political understanding as the desirable outcome of educational effort and a determination to direct resources to achieve these ends. These principles run counter to the taken-for-granted assumptions that the value of education can be reduced to its value as a commodity, that access to education is not an issue for equality or democracy and that support for adult education other than for personal consumption or skills training is frivolous, lacking in purpose or unrealistic. Government derision of ‘hobby classes’, holiday Spanish and ‘flower arranging’ has been an ideological ploy to set up crude divisions between adult educators. It is important to expose these rhetorical distinctions as unfounded in order to reassert the potential for *all* forms of education to enlighten, transform, liberate, democratise – as well as to upskill.

Radical hope also entails practical work and building alliances between university-based adult educators and academics and progressive forces within and beyond the wider education field. This involves formulating strategies for engaging with communities of interest and location. Whilst there remains in both countries a tendency amongst adult educators as ‘practical people’ (Thompson ed. 1980) to elevate activity over theory, in New Zealand, effective work has been done through university continuing education’s involvement in informal and formal regional adult and community education networks and through offering time, research expertise, training and support to the ACE sector. The capacity exists to build further on current alliances which are growing in defence

of adult education's potential contribution to the creation of a civil and just society. And, because there is a clear and continuing need to collect and disseminate evidence of the value of adult education, committed academics are well-placed to enter into collaborative research relationships with adult and community education providers.

However powerless they may at times consider themselves to be, academics continue to occupy a unique and privileged position (Crowther et al 2005; Wallace 2008): they have the advantage of a historically and research-informed overview; they have a platform of authority from which to act as 'critic and conscience' of society using the knowledge they generate to 'tell unwelcome truths' (Kemmis 2006) about educational inequalities. Through 'critical praxis: informed, committed action' (Carr and Kemmis 1986: 190) academics with a liberatory view of education can voice the 'unfashionable' and oppositional (Crowther et al 2005: 4; Martin 2008) and reassert the principles and pedagogy of education as a process, not merely a product. In return, university continuing education can learn from community-based adult education how best to bridge the gap between university and community, building pathways to and through university for those who would normally see it as not being open to them

## **Conclusions**

University continuing education in England and Aotearoa New Zealand has had to grapple with the complex, intertwined and sometimes contradictory changes which are happening in higher education – at global, national and institutional levels. These changes have radically reshaped traditional notions of adult

education and there have been many casualties – particularly in English universities. Whilst in New Zealand, there have been mitigating contextual factors, it is clear that university continuing education endeavours struggle to survive when government's vision of education becomes narrow and instrumentalist and when universities begin to feel the pressure of the market. It cannot claim the right to exist just because it has done so historically; indeed, it looks ominously likely that the structures of university continuing education may wither away. However, there is yet space to resist and to build radical hope through praxis, bringing adult education:

....under considered critical control and enlivening it with a commitment to educational and social values. (Carr and Kemmis 1986: 190)

University-based adult educators and academics committed to social justice in England, New Zealand, and doubtless elsewhere, still have an important role: they are ideally placed to expose neoliberalism's role in perpetuating and increasing inequality and to work with adult educators and learners to loosen its hegemonic grip.

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<sup>i</sup> The Treaty of Waitangi, signed in 1840 by representatives of the British Government and a number of the Chiefs of Māori tribes, established British governorship in Aotearoa New Zealand, whilst also recognising inter alia Māori rights to land and property ownership. Today, the Treaty is an important document which underpins the bicultural status of Aotearoa New Zealand and relationships between Māori and Pakeha (those of European settler heritage).

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